

DocTUM: How to write a good abstract

— an abstract guideline

Writing an Abstract for a Scientific Conference

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General points about abstracts

An abstract is a succinct summary of a longer piece of work, which is published in isolation from the main text and should therefore stand on its own and be understandable without reference to the longer piece. A conference abstract is a short piece of written work, often not more than 200 or 300 words, which serves at least three separate functions. **Each conference will have its own guidelines** as to how an abstract should be prepared. If authors do not follow these guidelines their abstract is more likely to be rejected.

The first function of an abstract is to **convince the conference organisers** that your paper is worth accepting. Hence, it tells the organisers what message you want to convey and how this fits into the general theme of the conference. Secondly, after you have been accepted to present a paper or a poster at the conference your abstract will end up in the conference programme or abstract book and **act as an advert for your talk or poster**. Capturing the **attention of the conference goer** is the other key role of your abstract.

Conference goers will base their decision to attend your paper, or any of the other ones on-going in the parallel session: on the contents of your short abstract. In theory, if you write an interesting abstract that is aimed at the target audience then you will also accomplish function 1 (that of convincing the conference organisers). Finally, after the conference has long finished, your abstract will act as a permanent record, especially if the conference programme or abstract book is published (either in hard copy or on the web).

- The abstract is a **condensed and concentrated version** of the full text of the research manuscript or your project.
- The abstract must be as **detailed as possible within the word count limits** specified by the conference guidelines. This requires good precise writing skills, as well as a fine judgement about what information is necessary and what is not.
- The abstract must contain as much information as possible on the analyses related to the primary and secondary outcome measures.
- The abstract should not present a biased picture, such as only favourable outcomes with the study drug, or findings that support the authors' hypotheses; important nonsignificant and adverse findings should also receive mention.
- Thus, to the extent possible, the reader should be able to independently evaluate the authors' conclusion.

Sections of an abstract

Most journals require abstracts to confirm a formal structure within a word count of, usually, 200-250 words. The usual sections defined in a structured abstract are the

- **Background \ introduction (and objectives)**
- **Methods**
- **Results**
- **Conclusion**

Background

This section should be the **shortest part of the abstract** and should very briefly outline the following information:

1. **What is already known** about the subject, related to the project/paper in question
2. **What is not known** about the subject and hence what the study intended to examine (or what the paper seeks to present)

The purpose of the background is to provide the reader with a background to the project, and hence to smoothly lead into a description of the methods employed in the investigation. So, keep this part of the background part short (word count!): The reader is interested in the abstract/paper because of its findings, and not because of its background.

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Materials and Methods

This methods section is usually **the second-longest section in the abstract**. It should contain enough information to enable the reader to understand what was done, and how. Important questions to which the methods section should provide brief answers are:

- What was the research design?
- What was the clinical diagnosis of the patients recruited?
- What was the setting of the study (if relevant)?
- What was the sample size in the whole sample and/or in the different groups?
- What treatments did patients in different groups receive, and at what doses?
- What was the duration of the study?
- On what research instruments were patients rated?
- What was the primary outcomes measure and how was it defined?

Results

The results section is **the most important part of the abstract and nothing should compromise its range and quality**. This is because readers who peruse an abstract do so to learn about the findings of the study. The results section should therefore be the **longest part of the abstract** and should contain as much detail about the findings as the journal word count permits.

For example,

- it is bad writing to state 'Response rates differed significantly between diabetic and nondiabetic patients.'
- A better sentence is 'The response rate was higher in nondiabetic than in diabetic patients (49% vs 30%, respectively; $P < 0.01$).'

Conclusion

This section should contain the most important take-home message of the study, expressed in a few precisely worded sentences. Usually, the finding highlighted here relates to the primary outcome measure; however, other important or unexpected findings should also be mentioned. It is also customary, but not essential, for the authors to express an opinion about the theoretical or practical implications of the findings, or the importance of their findings for the field. Thus, the conclusions may contain three elements:

- **The primary take-home message**
- **The additional findings of importance**
- **The perspective**

Despite its necessary brevity, this section has the most impact on the average reader because readers generally trust authors and take their assertions at face value. For this reason, the conclusions should also be scrupulously honest; and authors should not claim more than their data demonstrate.

Abstract template for the MGC Science Day

Abstracts must be submitted online (reps.mgc@tum.de, reps.phd.mgc@tum.de).

The abstract text is **limited to 300 words** but this does not include the information relating to title, author and affiliation.

Titel:

Authors:

Background and Objectives

Materials and Methods

Results

Conclusion